



Summary

WATER RESOURCES ADVISORY COMMISSION Recreational Issues Workshop

June 15, 2015, 5:00 PM
District Headquarters - B-1 Auditorium
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33406

1. Welcome, Opening Remarks and Purpose of Workshop - Newton Cook, Chairman

Mr. Cook called the meeting to order at 5:09 pm and welcomed Governing Board Member Melanie Peterson and Blake Guillory. Ms. Peterson introduced herself and informed attendees that she grew up hunting on District lands and understands the importance of maintaining public access to state owned properties. Ms. Peterson stated she would like to attend as many RIW meetings as possible.

Mr. Cook announced that the Recreation Discussion, Updates and Future Meeting Topics agenda item would take place at the end of the meeting instead of its usual agenda location.

2. Nature's Peace Guided Trail Walks - George Luther, Volunteer, Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed (CREW) Land and Water Trust

George Luther outlined the positive work that is being done related to guided trail walks for special needs groups in CREW. Mr. Luther thanked the District for modifying some of the trails, the parking area and restrooms to allow for wheelchair access and recognized District employee Maco Touchet for working closely with him on this initiative.

Discussion

An attendee asked if there was any consideration given to coordinating guided tours for the elderly population in the Naples area. Mr. Luther informed participants that senior citizens often participate in one of the three regular guided tours that take place during the week and there is not a current need to devise a tour strictly for the elderly.

An attendee expressed appreciation for the work that is being done to provide this service and said it was nice to see District lands used for this unique program. The attendee suggested that this type of service be explored on other District properties. There was a discussion concerning volunteers being valued at \$22.15 per hour by the IRS which equated to about \$86,000 worth of hours contributed by CREW volunteers last year.

A participant offered that CREW is a unique relationship for the District as it is a coalition of the District and the Land Trust that is strongly supported by a broad range of people including numerous benefactors in Collier and Lee counties that has worked to produce a very successful program. The contributor said the program presented tonight was new and could be used as a model for other locations and programs. Meeting attendees briefly discussed the contribution made to CREW by Jim Goodwin who left a legacy that supported the CREW recreation program and environmental education.

Mr. Luther described the funding for CREW by stating that nine years ago it was completely funded by the District at about \$100,000 and this year CREW has raised 58% of its total budget independent of District funds.

3. Overview of the Palm Beach Hounds Organization - Noel Ryan, Huntsman, Palm Beach Hounds

Noel Ryan provided a brief history of the Palm Beach Hounds Organization and its activities.

Discussion

Mr. Cook said the presentation was fascinating and the group enjoys the beauty of the hounds and the traditions that go back for generations and also understand the difficulty in running hounds today.

Ms. Peterson relayed a story regarding her first hunt with the Palm Beach Hounds on her sixteenth birthday which sparked her lifetime interest and said it is a great experience for all who get a chance. Ms. Peterson said programs like this provide an invaluable educational opportunity.

A participant said several months ago there were some concerns raised about dogs running deer in Nine Gems (Pal Mar) and the Dupuis Wildlife Management Area and asked for a brief description of how the hunt is conducted. Mr. Ryan said hunts usually take place twice a week beginning late September or early October and running through March when those concerns were raised. Mr. Ryan explained that even though the hounds are well trained, they are dogs that have been bred to hunt so occasionally they will run a deer. Mr. Ryan said the dogs are tracked and wear collars that will stop them from getting off track and that they have a strong training program that teaches them not to track deer.

Ms. Peterson said that sometimes a rogue hound or young hound will run a deer but it is never on purpose and she is familiar with this group and knows that every precaution is

taken to keep the dogs on track. Ms. Peterson said running deer is definitely not intentional.

Bob Pelio of Palm Beach Hounds stated about 5,000 to 6,000 acres are used for this event in Dupuis and Nine Gems. Mr. Ryan said the group also uses 20,000 acres of private acreage north of Yeehaw Junction along with some other private properties.

Participants thanked the organization for coming to provide an overview of their activities and clear up any questions and concerns raised about running deer. Mr. Ryan encouraged interested parties to join the hunt so that they can experience it for themselves. Mr. Ryan said it is important for all recreational users to support each other's activities and help keep properties open by protecting the natural resources.

4. Southern CREW Restoration Project Update - Janet Starnes, Project Manager Principal, West Coast and Local Projects Unit, Everglades Policy and Coordination Division, SFWMD

Janet Starnes provided an overview and current status of the Southern CREW project.

Discussion

Staff stated that construction was set to begin in October and there is currently an FWC check station in the Flint Pen Strand unit off of Poor Man's Pass and during construction that check station will be moved to the west to Vincent Road where it meets Bonita Beach Road. Staff stated the check station will remain there until construction is complete then will be moved permanently to the construction staging area on Vincent and Bonita Beach and will be in a much larger area and also serve as a trailhead. Staff informed the group that this will not affect access.

5. Public Use Facilities and Volunteer Project Updates - Bijaya Kattel, Sr. Planner, Land Stewardship Section, Field Operations and Land Management Division, SFWMD

Bijaya Kattel discussed recent activities underway involving public use facilities and highlighted the work being accomplished with the assistance of volunteers.

Discussion

Mr. Kattel asked participants from the Kissimmee River Valley Sportsman's Association and the Florida Airboat Association (FAA) to discuss the voluntary cleanup that took place in the Kissimmee River Valley and WCA2. Attendees said the group was able to clear back about two miles of existing trail in WCA2 and hopes to do it again in the future because the trail is overgrown and some assistance could be used to spray the vegetation to help maintain the trail in that area. Participants said this airboat trail starts from the Lox Road landing and goes out into the center of the marsh. The participant stated if the trail is cleared, this will allow people like duck hunters to get out into the marsh and away from the levee that runs parallel to the new homes being built in the area. Staff said the proposed vegetation spraying has been brought to the appropriate staff for review.

A participant began by discussing this year's airboat Freedom Ride that was launched from Miles Point this year and is likely one of the top five largest gatherings in the world comprised of about 600 airboaters from all over the nation. The Freedom Ride catapulted the group into this year's lake cleanup event and it was the first time in twenty eight years the cleanup was moved to a different site. The participant stated that the trash numbers have steadily decreased over time and the event has become a tradition that many participate in. The participant thanked Polk County for allowing use of the pavilion at no charge and the donation of a dumpster and said the turnout was the best they have ever had which included the participation of local residents, District staff, several Polk County Commissioners, and Parks and Recreation.

Ms. Peterson thanked the organizations for helping to keep airboat paths clear and assisting where needed during emergency events. Ms. Peterson said the airboat community does not get enough praise for the management of these trails and helping to provide the upkeep of natural lands.

A representative of the FAA said some of his organization members who have spraying companies are willing to volunteer their services. The representative said it is important to revitalize the trail and for the District to partner with the organization to do so. Staff suggested that the FAA and the District coordinate with FWC since this area is a wildlife management area and needs to be captured under the federal NPDES permit process.

6. Update on Hunting and Project Areas - Jerry Krenz, Sr. Planner, Land Stewardship Section, Field Operations and Land Management Division, SFWMD

Jerry Krenz covered changes to hunting opportunities on District lands.

Discussion

Mr. Cook said hunters that attended the STA recap meeting were interested in five additional permits on STA2 since a new cell has been opened and would like the District to consider the proposal. Mr. Wes Seitz, FWC, said their staff is considering that proposal but does not have an answer at this time.

An attendee said there was a discussion concerning a memorial that might be an obstacle. Staff responded the memorial has not been moved but it has been discussed with the appropriate parties and with construction slated to start in early November, there is adequate time to locate a new site and move it.

A participant asked when the check station at STA1W is moved for alligator hunting and will the hunt footprint change. Staff said the hunt perimeter will remain the same and the entrance would be through the Refuge gate at the very northeast corner of the STA, so the main route will be down the western power line levee at a diagonal. Staff said the west levee is likely to be taken by the construction company as their main north-to-south route in and out of the STA. The attendee asked how the south zone would be accessed. Staff said the main FPL levee that runs at a diagonal through the STA goes as far as necessary to access the entire area that has been designated for alligator hunting and a new map is being produced to help with locating the new site. Staff said

this year the old hunting check station, levees, and roads will be used for alligator hunting and the staging area and construction will not begin until November. Staff said early Teal and all other waterfowl hunting will not come out of the old station, but will need to go to the new check station. Mr. Cook said this information will need to be posted to all of the forums, to avoid confusion for those trying to access these sites. Staff informed the group and showed a map that there was planned FDOT road construction on CR880 between the old and new check stations.

An attendee wanted clarification regarding the impact of the Teal season on alligator season. Staff said the time for alligator hunting would be affected at all the STAs due to the waterfowl hunters being given one extra weekend of hunting so the alligator hunters are losing one weekend of hunting. Staff further explained how the alligator hunt will take place and the timing of waterfowl and alligator hunting season. Mr. Seitz from FWC and staff agreed that the appropriate materials, including maps and information printed on permits would be available prior to the start of hunting season to guide hunters through the proper dates and times.

Mr. Cook asked what was being done to provide boat ramps and public access on the C-44 project which is scheduled to be complete in 2019 and feature a large STA and deep storage reservoir. Staff said a boat ramp project was included as part of the project design as well as a large area at crest elevation for turn-around parking and boat launching into the reservoir along with an access road into both to the reservoir and the STA. Staff continued that as is typical the project is built and operations have been observed and STA vegetation growth has been evaluated for about a year, then public access could be granted.

An attendee thanked the District for the \$2M restoration project on the Loxahatchee River Dams replacement. The participant stated District staff has been cognizant of the wild and scenic nature of the River and has spent a lot of time working with the Loxahatchee River Management Coordinating Council to make sure the structure is safe and performs as intended.

Mr. Cook asked for an update on Strazzulla and if a park is still being planned for the property. Staff said the District's real estate staff is currently working on the exchange agreement with FWC for the Strazzulla property which will include a public recreation provision. Staff said the Refuge has conducted several public meetings and a public use plan is being developed and is slated for approval in January 2016 with a closing date anticipated for March 2016. Mr. Cook said this exchange will include 3,000 acres of formerly federally owned lands that will come into District ownership. Mr. Cook requested that this property be open to hunters when it becomes available.

7. Recreation on District Lands; Ten-Year Review - Dan Cotter, Section Leader, Land Stewardship Section, Field Operations and Land Management Division, SFWMD

Dan Cotter provided a comprehensive review of evolving recreational activities taking place on publicly owned properties that are managed by the District.

Discussion

Blake Guillory addressed meeting participants by reporting that he recently visited the A-1 FEB and the STA1W where great progress is being made and the Big Cypress Preserve where he saw a Florida Bear. Mr. Guillory said it is amazing that with a population of 20M, there is still so much land to recreate on.

8. Recreation Discussion, Updates and Future Meeting Topics

Discussion and Announcements

District staff announced the S135 structure will be closed until August 20th. The structure is located near the J&S Fish Camp on the east and northern portion of Lake Okeechobee.

A Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) representative announced that the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management will be presenting proposed modifications to black bass regulations for the State of Florida next week and hoped that everyone has had an opportunity to learn about the modifications up front. The proposal is thought to be one of the most progressive and forward thinking regulations in the nation.

A contributor requested that decisions that add more hunting opportunities to one user group while subtracting opportunities from others be brought before the WRAC RIW prior to the final decision made. The reference was to the extended permits and hunting time allotted to waterfowl hunters while alligator hunters had to give up some time.

An attendee asked about the grades being closed off at the M1 canal in the Corbett area due to work being done on the easement. Mr. Seitz said the project seems to be moving forward according to reports provided by FWC staff working in the area and the plan is to complete construction on the portion of the project that impacts access prior to hunting season. Both staff and Mr. Seitz said they would look further into the matter and relay updates.

Meeting participants thanked the District staff for bringing together so many diverse groups of recreational users in this meeting and share how they use public lands. They also applauded the District for inviting recreational users to share their ideas and collaborate to open District lands for public use.

An attendee noted that the Governing Board has been under a lot of criticism lately, but recreational users are fully supportive of the Board and their decisions.

A stakeholder thanked Jim Orth, Project Management Section Leader, SFWMD, for providing site plans and completing improvements on Catfish Creek. This will allow access from Lake Hatchineha to Lake Pierce. The participant also thanked Queenester Nieves for providing information quickly and with a positive attitude.

An attendee said the Water Conservation Area 2 (WCA2) boat ramp is in need of repair before the water levels rise.

A participant mentioned the success of the Youth Hunt Program and said without the District and its lands, the program would not be as successful and the kids will be the ones to carry on as land stewards.

FWC representative Wes Seitz said he appreciates the collaborative effort the District puts forth to work with the agency and commended the positive interagency relationship that has been forged.

Mr. Cook noted the cost of completing projects and opening up public lands for recreational opportunities and that Water Management District budgets have been drastically reduced. Mr. Cook said some of the Amendment 1 funding should be distributed to the Districts for land management and some for land buying, but primarily land management due to the exotics that are growing up on District properties.

Possible Future Meeting Topics

1. Lake Okeechobee Scenic Trail Update (USACE) on when levee will be opened for hiking.
2. Lake Okeechobee Water Levels Scheduling (LORS). The participant would like staff to present on the appropriate Lake levels for optimum environmental benefits since some stakeholders would like the Lake managed at a higher water level while others would like to see it remain lower. The stakeholder thinks that explaining why Lake levels are managed the way they are would help people with the idea of shared adversity. The attendee mentioned the number and variety of birds in and around the Lake and said it was ideal for birding.

9. Adjourn

Mr. Cook announced the next regular WRAC meeting is being held on August 6th with no July meeting and the next WRAC RIW is scheduled for September 14th. Mr. Cook announced that an aquatic vegetation meeting for spraying and aerial treatment planning would be held on Wednesday, June 24th at 10:00am at the Okeechobee Service Center. The meeting was adjourned at 7:47 pm